

At the age of 6 years, children may attend Preschool Class. Preschool Class is a bridge between preschool and school, providing children with the first step towards the objectives of the curriculum and a linkage among the activities of preschool, school and leisure-time centers. Services are provided at no charge for up to 525 hours per year. As of October 2002, 94% of all six-year-olds were enrolled in Preschool Class.

For families with children (up to twelve years) enrolled in school, child care services are available in leisure-time centers (after-school) and family day-care homes, as well as in complementary open leisure-time activity for children ages 10 – 12 years. The leisure-time settings are intended to provide educational group activity during the school-free part of the day and year for school children up to twelve years of age.

### **Access to Preschool Services**

Preschool activities are planned for, provided and monitored at the local level and must be made available to all families within three to four months of a child's birth. While preschool activity is the right of all children, preschool services are not evenly spread throughout the country and large regional differences prevail. The lack of access to services for some families is a result of demand created by laws enacted in the last four years to address the needs of the unemployed and parents on leave. By law, children of the unemployed have the right to preschool for at least three hours a day or equivalent. Children whose parents were on parental leave have the same right.

### **Features of Preschool Services**

The school is described as a social and cultural meeting place providing opportunities for all who work there to experience objectivity and acceptance of a range of different approaches. The task of the school is to promote learning by stimulating the individual into acquiring knowledge in partnership with families and pupils themselves.

Preschool in Sweden is considered the first step of education and lifelong learning. In 2002, 30.1 billion SEK (about \$3.75 billion) was invested in child care services, reflecting an 8% increase between 2001 and 2002. The cost of care is borne mainly by the government, with

parents paying a maximum fee of up to ten percent of their income.

The maximum fee called "max tax" was introduced in January 2002 in an effort to increase accessibility to preschools and child care for school children. This fee structure also aims to improve the economic circumstances of families with children and to facilitate participation in the workforce.

The workforce is composed mainly of women (94%, compared to 99% in NC) and is estimated to number 108,500 (full and part time staff serving as supervisors and teachers) as of 2002. The average preschool wage is equivalent to that of a public school teacher in NC (about \$25,000).

Preschool activities are guided by a single national curriculum, Laroplan. The Laroplan or LpFo 98 is the first step of the three-pronged curriculum that guides the work of the compulsory school (elementary school in the US). Preschool staff use the Laroplan not as a regulatory framework but as a guide for their work with each child and groups of children. The implementation of the national curriculum by preschool staff is guided and overseen by a Rector. A copy of the Laroplan in English is available on the Skolverket website at (<http://www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=1068>).

Preschool activities are based in the concepts of democracy and must be carried out in a manner that encourages respect for both the intrinsic value of each person and for the environment shared. The school curriculum requires that education be adapted to each child's circumstances and needs, drawing from the child's background, earlier experiences, language and knowledge to promote further learning and acquisition of knowledge.

The use of a national curriculum as a guide is possible because, in large part, of the quality of the preschool teaching workforce. Today, 98% of the Swedish preschool workforce has a degree or extensive education and experience. And, over 90% of the teaching workforce are part of a collective, which represents their workplace needs and rights. The preschool workforce is provided with a wage commensurate with required education, is largely represented by a collective or union, and is supported by an array of professional benefits including paid breaks,